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ABSTRACT

This paper presented at the International Reading Association in Denver defines a basal reader series as an interrelated set of materials for teaching fundamental reading skills and attitudes, including not only traditional eclectic basal readers but also linguistic, phonic, and programed series. As new developments come to the fore in reading instruction, authors, editors, and publishers of basal readers prepare new or revised series incorporating those trends which they consider worthwhile. Currently important trends which are likely to appear in basal readers of the near future include behavioral objectives, criterion-based mastery and diagnostic tests, and prescribed individualized practice based on analysis of pupil needs, some of it audio-visual or multi-sensory. As these trends develop, the differences between systems approaches and basal reader approaches will diminish. Much will depend on the ability of ordinary teachers to manage a complicated system. (Author/WR)

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Approaches to Teaching Reading: The Systems Approach Versus the Basal Reader Approach

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Before any comparisons can be drawn between a systems approach and a basal reader approach, it is necessary to define terms. Basal readers have been defined as "an interrelated set of materials for teaching fundamental reading skills. At a minimum, such a set requires a sequence of reading materials for the learners, graded in difficulty, and guides or manuals on how to teach with these materials. Many different kinds of supplements and accessories to this basic minimum are now available"(Harris, 1972). Defined in this way the term includes not only the traditional eclectic series, but also phonic, linguistic, and programmed series.

A recent paper issued by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Media and Technology is a helpful source of information about systems approaches (Twelker, Urbach & Buck, 1972). According to that paper, "there is general agreement that the 'systems approach to instruction' is a systematic was of identifying, developing and evaluating a set of materials and strategies aimed at accomplishing a particular educational goal." A systems approach is a set of management techniques for seeking solutions to educational problems and includes defining, planning, developing, evaluating, and feeding back information for the improvement

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of the end result. As defined in this way, a systems approach is essentially a process for developing a combination of methods and materials, rather than a particular kind of outcome.

The main applications of a systems approach in reading instruction so far have been the development of computer-assisted reading instruction and Individually Prescribed Instruction (IPI). The Wisconsin Design for Reading Skill Development and the PLAN System are others. Diagnostic teaching, described in some recent books on reading, hardly seems to exist at present outside of corrective and remedial reading programs. The term "diagnostic and prescriptive instruction" is used in the research literature to describe applications of reinforcement theory to the changing of classroom behavior rather than to academic learning. It would be tempting to compare these one by one with the basal reader approach, but that is not the purpose of this paper. Rather, this paper will attempt to compare the common features of systems approaches with the common features of basal reader approaches, to discover similarities as well as differences, and to offer some guesses about trends in the near future.

The nine main features of systems approaches identified by Twelker, Urbach and Buck provide the framework for these comparisons. Their first main heading, problem identification and organization, has three subheadings: identification of the problem, analysis of the setting, and organization of management. These steps are just as important in the preparation or revision of a basal reader series as in systems development. In identification of the problem, decisions have to be made about the target population -- the ages or grades for which it is

intended, whether to aim for the general population or for a special group such as inner-city minority group children, and so forth. In analysis of setting, the increasing use of non-graded sequential levels rather than grade levels tends to make basal series independent of the specifics of school organization. It is generally assumed, however, that the basal materials should be teachable by one teacher per classroom to a sizeable class of children who show wide variation in reading skills as well as in other significant characteristics. By organization of management the systems analyst refers to the need to have a staff for the preparation of the system, whose duties are allocated in clear-cut fashion. The basal reader publisher does the same when he assembles a group of authors and an editorial staff, and spells out in detail who is responsible for what. Thus in problem identification and organization there is little real difference between systems procedures and basal reader procedures.

Their second main heading, systems analysis and development, has three subheadings: identification of objectives, specification of methods, and construction of prototypes. The systems people and the advocates of programmed instruction have made quite an impact on educators by stressing the importance of stating objectives so that their attainment can be objectively determined. Behavioral or performance objectives are stated in terms of what the learner should be able to do, rather than in terms of what the teacher does. Within the past three years one can observe a shift in some basal reader series toward reformulating their objectives in behavioral or performance terms. In doing this, the very important areas of reading interests, tastes, and attitudes must not be overlooked.

The next subheading is specification of methods. Systems people tend to be strongly influenced by the methodology of programmed instruction and to aim for a very highly individualized methodology, while the producers of basal readers are primarily concerned with group instructional procedures. Some systems people seem to assume that a non-individualized system is a contradiction in terms. With both a systems approach and a basal reader approach, decisions are made in advance about the scope, type of content, and methodology, mainly on the basis of the developers' preconceived ideas about what ought to work best. The ERIC paper points out that in choosing the method and format of instruction the development team cannot be sure of success the first time, but must depend on tryouts and revisions to refine the system. However, almost always tryouts provide minor refinements and corrections, but rarely do they result in a major change in methodology.

The next subheading is construction of prototypes. A prototype is simply a rough first draft of something; in this case, of a teaching program. In the systems approach this usually follows a sequence of pretest,,teach, and retest, with one child at a time. In computer-assisted instruction the format is like that of programmed instruction, with a combination of visual displays on a screen and taped vocal instructions and comments. The child responds by pointing with a light pen at a specific point on the screen, or by tapping out an answer on a special typewriter. The computer keeps track of the learner's progress, and when he makes errors, can branch him to more practice, or a different kind of practice, on the skill not mastered. In Individually Prescribed Instruction a computer scores tests, interprets the results,

and indicates what learning material the pupil should use next (Duda, 1970; Richardson, 1969). Alternatively, the test scoring can be done by test scoring machine, or by teacher aides. There seems to be a fairly general agreement that the testing burden is too heavy for a teacher to handle unaided.

Basal readers, on the other hand, are planned to be used primarily in group instruction. Most basal readers employ an instructional pattern involving preparation for reading the selection, guided reading and discussion, skills practice, and enrichment activities. Much is left to the teacher's judgment: the size and composition of the group, the pace of instruction, the amount of instructional time, when parts of the teaching plan can be omitted for fast learners or need amplification for slower learners, the identification of individual needs and making provisions for them.

In a systems approach it may seem that the role of the teacher is reduced as much as possible; the goal has sometimes been expressed as an intention to produce a teacher-proof system. The more central role of the teacher in basal reader instruction is reflected in the well established finding that differences in teacher competence among teachers using the same reader series are more significant than differences attributable to the use of different basal reader series.

The third major phase of systems procedure is evaluation. Its three subdivisions are the testing of the prototype, analysis of results, and either finalization of the program or recycling. Recycling means making some changes in the prototype and trying it out again.

Usually the first step in refining a prototype is critical review by a group of judges. The material is carefully read and it may be accepted as it is, revised, or rejected. This is true with both systems material and basal reader materials. After revision or replacement, systems material is usually tried out with a few children and then may be revised again; this process can be repeated until the developers are satisfied with it. Basal reader publishers tend to field test samples rather than the entire program, to do it with an inexpensive format such as photocopied typescript, and to do it on a small scale.

Application of a readability formula is another form of evaluation usually employed with basal reader material. If a selection is found to be too difficult, the vocabulary and sentence structure may be further simplified, or the selection may be moved to a more advanced place in the series.

Both systems materials and basal readers include a series of tests in the total plan. In systems materials the emphasis tends to be on short, criterion-referenced tests, each keyed to a specific objective. Basal reader mastery tests tend to be more comprehensive and to be given at longer intervals. Usually there is a mastery test to be given at the completion of each instructional level, with sections covering new vocabulary, decoding skills, and comprehension skills taught at that level. A series of placement tests may also be provided. It is possible to use each workbook exercise as a criterion-referenced test of the skills involved, but relatively few teachers do so. The development and use of specific criterion-referenced tests based on performance objectives may be a trend in the basal readers of the next few years.

Most projects applying the systems approach to reading have had the

benefit of generous funding for developmental research, and so are able to continue to test outcomes and revise the system over a period of years. A commercial publisher of basal readers improves his product as much as possible before it is finalized in printed books, but the heavy costs of illustrations, printing, and binding do not allow revisions at short intervals. Thus the results of mastery tests, collected from schools using a particular basal reader series, tend to influence a revised edition that is published a few years later. In between, supplementary materials are developed to round out the series.

Probable Trends

As new developments come to the fore in reading instruction, the publishers, authors and editors of basal readers prepare new or revised series which incorporate those new trends which they consider worthwhile.

One of the trends likely to appear in basal readers of the future is the use of behavioral or performance objectives. This in turn leads to the development of criterion-referenced tests, one for each objective. If one uses a criterion-referenced test, one should have available some extra practice material for those who fail a particular test. This should be as self-administering as possible. One form of self-administered material can be a self-correcting workbook or practice pad. Chemical treatment of the page can provide ways of indicating right or wrong answers which become visible only after the pupil has entered an answer. Another form of self-administering practice utilizes a cassette tape to provide oral instructions before a child does an exercise, and then tells and explains the correct answers after he has completed the exercise. Basal reader supplements of these kinds are already

beginning to appear. Still another form of audio-visual supplement is a taped reading of a selection which can be used by an individual child or small group, in a progression from listening, to reading along with the voice, to rereading independently. Such tapes are already available in Spanish and English versions as supplements to basal readers.

If basal readers do move in the direction of more specific and more frequent testing and more individualized practice based on test results, the differences between systems approaches and basal reader approaches will diminish. The basal reader series may become a basal reader system. Some publishers have already taken the step of calling a new reading program a system rather than a series.

Greater complexity and greater individualization, however, place added burdens on the classroom teacher. Typical elementary school teachers today feel that they are doing about as much as they can when they manage reading instruction with a class divided into two or three groups. In a recent comparison of conventional three-group teaching with very flexible grouping at fourth grade level, Eberwein (1972) found no significant differences in reading achievement gain or pupil attitudes toward reading. However, flexible grouping required an average of 296 minutes per week, an hour and forty minutes more than the three-group plan. Few teachers are going to spend five hours a week on planning their reading instruction, outside of a short-term experimental situation. If we present teachers with a complex system calling for the frequent giving and scoring of tests, differentiated individual and small-group assignments, and

monitoring this practice and its results, massive resistance from teachers seems a very real possibility. They will demand evidence that the system is manageable by most teachers, and they will require expert instruction in the details of operating it.

The cost factor is another consideration. Computer-assisted instruction, which is a supplement to and not a replacement of classroom instruction, has been estimated to cost about $70 per pupil per year, not counting installation costs and assuming that the computer is within local telephone distance from the computer (Atkinson & Fletcher, 1972). The results look promising; the cost is, for the present at least, prohibitive for most school systems. In individually prescribed instruction, the cost of scoring and recording the frequent tests is high, whether done by a computer, by a test scoring machine, or by a teacher aide. For the present at least, most systems approaches in reading are considerably more costly to operate than conventional basal reader instruction. For school systems that do not have access to special funding for participation in systems development projects, and which cannot supply a wealth of aides and volunteers to supplement the teachers' efforts, a true systems approach does not seem feasible as yet.

For the near future, therefore, it seems likely that most school systems will continue to center their reading instruction around basal readers. The basal readers will slowly and cautiously adopt certain features of the systems approach, making sure that they are manageable by ordinary teachers under typical school conditions, and moving toward an effective combination of group and individualized procedures.

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